TO DWELL IN PERFECT UNITY
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Psalm 133
John 17:20–23
Ephesians 4:1–6

"I beg you to lead a life worthy . . . , making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."
Ephesians 4:1, 3 (NRSV)

As every reader knows, the Gospels are overwhelmingly concerned with the conduct of human life. In the Sermon on the Mount and in other places Jesus is asking his followers to see that the way to a more abundant life is the way of love.
We are to love one another, and this love is to be more comprehensive than our love
for our family and friends and tribe and nation. We are to love our neighbors
though they may be strangers to us. We are to love our enemies.
And this is to be a practical love: It is to be practiced here and now.
Love evidently is not just a feeling but is indistinguishable from
the willingness to help, to be useful to one another.

Wendell Berry
The Way of Ignorance

I can remember my first visit to Gettysburg. It was one of the places my father thought everyone should see. He took me out of school, borrowed his father's 1941 Dodge, and we drove to Gettysburg. He showed me the famous places: Little Round Top, Devil's Den, the Peach Orchard, Cemetery Ridge. Years later I took my own children, and not long ago I returned again. *Enjoy* is not the right word to describe the experience. Awe, fearful awe—at the human capacity for bravery and sacrifice; fearful awe at the human propensity for tragedy, for violent conflict, for war; fearful awe at the human tendency for citizens of our nation, members of one family, to fight one another to the death. Gettysburg is a place to ponder the human condition.

On July 3, 1863, the final tragic battle was fought. We know it as Pickett's Charge. Robert E. Lee ordered an advance of 14,000 Confederate troops

led by General George Pickett, across an open field, three quarters of a mile long and a mile wide. Union troops and artillery were dug in on the rise on the other side. It was an amazing sight, and it was over in thirty minutes. Less than half of the Confederate troops survived.

Fifty years later, July 1913, veterans of two armies that clashed that day returned to Gettysburg for a reunion and reenactment of Pickett's Charge. The old Union soldiers took their position on the ridge, and the old Confederate soldiers marched across the open field. "Then an extraordinary thing happened" as the old Union soldiers moved out to rush down at the old men marching across the field, "a great cry went up, only instead of doing battle as they had a half century earlier, this time they threw their arms around each other. They embraced each other and wept" (see Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, p. 248). Two images: one of the tragedy of war, the other an image of the hope of peace.

Frederick Buechner ponders that experience of forgiveness and reconciliation and healing in the context of the images the evening news brings into our homes: frightening images of the human propensity for violent conflict, hatred and killing. "In the Middle East, in Africa, in our own streets," he says, "there are always people fighting other people for control, for power, for revenge, for freedom, for a bigger slice of the pie" (p. 245). The news has not been good. Thirty, forty, fifty people per day die in Iraq in sectarian violence. Something like 90 percent of the people we have liberated from dictatorship in Iraq nevertheless say they approve of attacks on our troops. Last week a new intelligence report gave us something new to worry about: global jihad, a worldwide assault on our presence in the Middle East, our policies regarding Israel and Palestine, our values.

The evening news has not been good recently. But we Christians are people of indestructible hope. Buechner says there is something else behind all the fighting on the evening news, namely a search for peace, a yearning, a hunger for peace, a human propensity that reveals itself just frequently enough to remind us of its reality, as it did on that field in Gettysburg on July 3, 1913.

World Communion Sunday is a yearly reminder that there is a unity, a oneness, given to us in Jesus Christ; a reminder that the creator's will for the creation is peace, harmony; a reminder that God is always working in and through the tragic events of human history to bring about that precious peace. For me, this year, as we ponder the sectarian violence, the threat of jihad, war between civilizations, this Sunday is a reminder that the peace of God is God's hope for all of us, all of God's children: God's Muslim and Jewish children, God's Christian and Buddhist and Hindu children. All creation, the whole world, all people.

At the very beginning of the Christian story, there is a strong emphasis on peace and unity within the Christian community itself. “Lead a life worthy,” the letter to the Ephesians admonishes Christian believers in the first century and then describes what that new life looks like. It’s a wonderful list, a heartbreakingly beautiful catalog: humility and gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This is important; this is at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus: humility, gentleness, patience, love, unity, peace.

Jesus himself prayed that his followers—the ones he was with at the moment, but also all those who will come later—all of us, our parents, grandparents, great-great grandparents, ourselves, and those who will come after us, our children and their children and their children’s children, that we might *all* be one so that the world will know that God is and that God’s love has come in Jesus.

These passages are painful to read because of the ongoing scandal of Christian disunity. It seems sometimes that what we’re best at is arguing, fighting, being divided. Catholics and Protestants still can’t break the bread of communion together; the Southern Baptists don’t want anything to do with most of the rest of us; some evangelicals are so wary they won’t even sit down and talk. Episcopalians and Presbyterians are in the news—not because we show the world what peace and unity look like, but because even within our own denominations we can’t stand to be in the same church together.

It’s not very peaceful or gentle in the Christian family. A new documentary film, *Jesus Camp*, will appear in theaters throughout the country this week. It’s about a Bible camp, “Kids on Fire,” in which little children are dressed up in fatigues, faces painted in camouflage colors, and taught that nonbelievers are opponents to be converted or engaged and defeated. The real enemy is secular government. Camp leader Becky Fischer, who appeared on late-night TV last week, says, “Democracy doesn’t work. We’ve got to take back the land.” Religious diversity is not to be tolerated. “A holy war is coming,” Pat Robertson promises.

And so the biblical call for unity and love and gentleness and patience becomes more critical than ever—unity and peace in the church, the whole church and then extending outward, beyond the boundaries of our community, our own religion, to embrace all of God’s children.

In his new book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg observes that “the most visible public activity of the Jesus Movement was its inclusive meal practice.” In fact, Jesus was criticized and condemned for the inclusivity of his own dinner table, where he sat down with sinners and where he

welcomed the marginalized and outcast. Borg says it was a political act that "subverted the social boundaries of his day" (p. 91).

Wouldn't it be something if we were known for that, for subverting the boundaries that separate people rather than building higher, stronger ones? Wouldn't it be something if we started to measure ourselves by whom we include rather than whom we exclude? Wouldn't it be something if our energy were invested in the hospitality of our table rather than the moral purity of the guests or the orthodoxy of their theology?

In the Bible, the unity of the church is based not on everyone agreeing, singing from the same hymnal, reciting the same creed, worshiping in the same style, but on God's love for all. In the Bible, unity is a gift given by God, not a goal achieved by human determination. "There is one body and one baptism," the Bible says, not because we all got together and agreed on a singular ecclesiology, Christology, theology. There is one body and one baptism because God says there is.

The question for our time, for World Communion Sunday 2006, is whether or not we can affirm, trust, and live the unity that is ours in Christ enough to extend it to others, to people of other faith traditions. It is not an easy question. Many don't even want to think about it, even to consider respectful, accepting relationships with people of other faith traditions. I believe we must. I believe God calls us to it, to brave new ways of thinking and acting in relationship to others other than as targets for conversion. I think it is the most important issue in the world.

Sometimes it just happens, breaks through, in the midst of the most intractable conflicts and hatreds, like that remarkable afternoon of July 3, 1913. I read a newspaper account recently under the headline "Harmony across a Divide." It was about young Israeli and Arab musicians playing in an orchestra organized by Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said, a Palestinian-American scholar. Since 1999, eighty or so musicians from Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan have been meeting in the summer to rehearse together, live together, and present concerts, mostly in Europe. It is still going on, although this past summer was a severe test. The orchestra assembled in Seville just after the war in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah broke out. A dozen musicians quit and went home. Most stayed. In fact, they hammered out a statement that said, "There is no military solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict and the destinies of the two peoples are inextricably linked." The concerts are happening in Seville, Milan, Berlin. Daniel Barenboim said, "This is a very small reply to the terrible horrors of war" (*New York Times,* 20 August 2006). It is also an example of the peace of God that passes all understanding.

Including the other, subverting the boundaries, reaching across dividing walls of nation, ethnicity, religion—there is no more important issue, nor are there any more appropriate advocates and agitators and practitioners than the followers of Jesus, the one who subverted the boundaries, included the excluded, the one who prayed that his followers, by their unity, might show the world something of what he is up to.

I loved something Clarence Page wrote last week in his editorial on Pope Benedict's speech in which the pope said that the Muslim practice of spreading the faith by the sword was evil. Page said, and many agreed, that he wished the pope had said that spreading faith by the sword is always evil, that it is particularly evil when violence is done in the name of anyone's religion and scripture, Jewish and Christian as well as Muslim. Page concluded with a flourish: "I'll leave the theological arguments to the experts, but so far as intergroup relations go, I turn to the gospel according to Aretha Franklin: You begin with R-E-S-P-E-C-T."

There is another way, an alternative, a subversive option. It is God's way, God's peace.

For those of us who would follow Jesus, who today come to table with millions of other followers, who meet at that table all those who went before and all who will come after, it can happen in the only place it really can begin, in individual human hearts. So I invite you to open your heart to it this morning—the promise of God's peace, God's perfect unity.

> Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

We sang one of the great hymns of our tradition to begin this service, "I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art." The words were probably written by John Calvin to a tune familiar to those first Presbyterians in Geneva.

The fourth stanza always stops me in my tracks and touches me deeply. It's a prayer. Please join me as we sing it together, our common prayer:

> Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness,
> No harshness hast thou and no bitterness:
> O grant to us the grace we find in thee,
> That we may dwell in perfect unity. Amen.